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# ENG 5010-001: Studies in Twentieth-Century American Literature: African American Whiteness

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**Studies in Twentieth-Century American Literature:  
African American Whiteness**  
English 5010—Fall, 2006

Instructor: Tim Engles

Phone: 581-6316 (it's usually easier to reach me by e-mail: [tdengles@eiu.edu](mailto:tdengles@eiu.edu))

Office hours (Coleman 3831): Tues/Thurs, 2:00 – 3:00 and by appointment

Course listserv: [5010f06@lists.eiu.edu](mailto:5010f06@lists.eiu.edu)

Required Texts:

David R. Roediger *Black on White* (1998)

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (1992)

Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934)

Zora Neale Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948)

Richard Wright, *Savage Holiday* (1954)

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)

Percival Everett, *Erasure* (2001)

Course Description:

America's literary canon has expanded to include a number of African Americans. Like authors who write from other identifiable or self-proclaimed minority positions, African American writers tend to be read in search of insight into their own supposed group experience. Thus, it may surprise you to learn that a great deal of African American intellectual energy has been devoted to understanding the complexities of white experience, and of white power. In part because those Americans who have been labeled "black" have had much to fear from those who have been labeled "white," many significant African American writers have provided penetrating insight into the thoughts, values, and behavior of America's racial majority, insights from which even whites themselves can learn. As we will see, such stories, essays, and novels can also help us understand the broader significance for all Americans of centuries of white hegemony.

Our course will be conducted as an inquiring conversation on these matters, with your active participation central to our work. Because the success of our conversations will depend so heavily on everyone's participation, it is crucial that you keep up with the reading, and that you do so with careful attention. In fact, we will begin each session with a reading quiz, primarily intended to insure that you do maintain attentive reading habits. Also, the rule regarding attendance is: be here. If you have more than two absences this semester, your course grade will drop a full letter grade for each absence beyond two.

### Course Requirements:

1. Written response and oral presentation: Each student will choose one day on the syllabus. For this class session, you will write a two-page, single-spaced response/review of a related secondary source (usually chosen by the instructor). This written response will be duplicated and handed out to the rest of us on the day of your presentation, and it will function as your guidelines for summarizing the secondary source's main or most useful points, and for leading class discussion for a significant portion of the session. Suggestions: focus attention on a problem or set of problems, and the apparent solution(s) offered in the secondary source; make connections, within the text, and/or with others; zero in on a significant or surprising aspect of the secondary source and/or the novel that we're reading at the time. Other approaches are of course possible. The written response should end with at least two questions whose answers could provide, as you see it, keys to understanding the primary text under discussion. Don't plan on talking by yourself for long—your main goal is to stimulate discussion. After the discussion of the text, you will then revise your response (into something no more than three pages, single spaced) on the basis of your reaction to how class discussion changed (or verified) your response to the secondary source, and describing also how well you think your presentation and the class discussion went. This revision will be due one week after the in-class presentation. (15%)

2. 5-7 page critical essay: This paper will focus on any one of our syllabus readings from the first half or so of the semester (in the case of Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, you could focus on it alone, or use it to help interpret another work on the syllabus). Focus your close interpretation of the work in any way you choose, taking your reader beyond what most readers are likely to realize when first reading the text. You are welcome to incorporate points and insights raised during class discussion, but if you do so, do your best to add further insight. Like the longer essay, this one will follow traditional conventions for academic essays (e.g., unity, coherence, proper formatting and MLA-style documentation, and so on). You are welcome to use any secondary sources, but they are not required for this paper. Because this essay is due near midterm, you can think of it as a kind of take-home midterm. (20%)

3. 12-15 page research essay: This paper will focus on one of the *other* literary texts on our syllabus (in other words, you may not write about the same text in both essays). The topic is open, as long as it relates directly to some of our readings and discussions, and a 250-400 word proposal will be required beforehand. The essay must reflect your close attention to and understanding of insights and interpretive concepts that will have arisen throughout the semester, and of course, it must be an entirely new essay (not something you wrote for a previous course). (25%)

A bit more about essays: All writing assignments are due at the beginning of the class period on the day they are due, whether the student is in class or not. Late-paper penalty: fifteen points each day late. IMPORTANT: When each of the two essays is turned in, it MUST be accompanied in a manila folder by all notes and drafts written towards it, with the final copy of the essay on top of this material. I will use these materials to gauge and

offer comments on your writing process. I WILL NOT GRADE an essay that is not accompanied by material that clearly demonstrates several earlier stages leading up to the final draft, so be sure to save all such materials (if you do most or all of your writing on a computer, print out occasional drafts to include with your final copy). Essays unaccompanied by materials that clearly demonstrate several stages of development toward the final copy will receive an automatic ZERO.

4. Final exam (take home—details will be provided later in the semester) (25%)

5. Active, thoughtful class participation and good reading-quiz grades: I will not deliver lectures in this class; because we are a relatively small group, we must all contribute to a positive, challenging, interesting learning environment. Doing so will call for your careful concentration before class on each assigned reading, and your willingness to share your thoughts, questions, and feelings with others about what you read and hear. Again, because your careful preparation for class is so crucial, I will begin each session with a reading quiz. I know that because you are graduate students I can trust most of you to keep up with our heavy reading load, but past experience has demonstrated that reading quizzes are the best way to ensure that everyone is prepared to participate in class discussion. Questions on the quiz can also function at times as a good lead-in to class discussion. Because the answers to unannounced quizzes tend to arise during class discussion, and because one purpose of the quizzes is to encourage punctual class attendance, these quizzes cannot be made up (even if you come to class late). These quizzes also function as a reward for those who attend class regularly and on time. On the other hand, I recognize that students must miss class at times and therefore might miss a quiz through no fault of their own, so at the end of the semester I will drop your lowest quiz grade when calculating your grades. Be aware that most of these novels are intense, concentrated, demanding readings, and schedule your study time accordingly. (15%)

#### Other Matters:

**E-mail:** Enrollment in this class requires an e-mail account, and I strongly recommend that you use your free EIU account or another account (be aware that Yahoo, Hotmail, and other free accounts are sometimes too limited for professional purposes). E-mail is the quickest, easiest way to reach me if I am not in my office; I welcome any and all questions and comments.

**Academic honesty:** I expect you to act honestly and do your own work in this class, and so does Eastern Illinois University. It is your responsibility (once again) to familiarize yourself with the English Department's policy on plagiarism: "Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—'The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's original work' (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office."

**ENGLISH 5010: DAILY SCHEDULE**  
**(this schedule may be subject to change)**

**Note:** This schedule may change; any changes will be announced in advance. Reading assignments are to be completed by the dates on which they appear on the syllabus. BE SURE to bring the appropriate handout or book to class if a reading assignment is listed for that day.

R AUG 24 Introduction to course, each other, etc.

Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926)

M AUG 28 8 p.m. — deadline for sending an e-mail message to Dr. Engles

(tdengles@eiu.edu), who will use your address to subscribe you to the class listserv

In your message, (1) identify which course you're in (English 5010); (2) describe yourself in whatever way you choose, including your career aspirations; and (3) write a statement to the effect that you have carefully read and agree with the above course policies and requirements (or perhaps that you disagree with some of them—which is okay, if you explain why)

R AUG 31 Roediger, *Black on White*, 1-55

F SEP 1 Graduate student orientation and reception, 3 p.m., English Department Conference Room

R SEP 7 Butler, *Kindred*, and Painter, "Slavery and Soul Murder" (in Roediger, *Black on White*)

R SEP 14 *Kindred*

R SEP 21 Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*

R SEP 28 Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

R OCT 5 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

R OCT 12 *The Bluest Eye*

R OCT 19 Wright, *Savage Holiday* and "Uncle Tom's Children" (handout)

**Paper 1 due at the beginning of class**

R OCT 26 *Savage Holiday*

R NOV 2 Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee*

R NOV 9 *Seraph on the Suwanee*

R NOV 16 Everett, *Erasure*

**Proposal for final paper due at the beginning of class** (if you prefer, it's okay to send this proposal by e-mail to [tdengles@eiu.edu](mailto:tdengles@eiu.edu))

M NOV 20 – F NOV 24 Thanksgiving Recess

R DEC 30 *Erasure*

R DEC 7 Final day of class; final papers due

M DEC 15 – F DEC 19 final exams; our final exam period is Thursday, 12/18, 7:30-9:30